

FIRST PERSON

COME FLY WITH ME

Celia Pym's unusual commission to restore a theatre costume came to life when it caught the imagination of the public

IN 2016, I WAS COMMISSIONED by the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco to mend a large gold cape, made from silk and cotton and decorated with thousands of sequins. The history of this beautiful garment is a mystery. It was found in one of the museum's non-inventoried material boxes. These boxes contain damaged costumes and 'study' fragments from the Monte Carlo Opera House. There were no notes or documents relating to the gold cape.

We don't know which ballet it was made for, which long-dead dancers wore it, which characters they played while wearing it, or exactly how old it is.

That spring, I took the Gold Cape with me to a residency at Texilsetur Íslands. The cape came along because it needed a lot of work, and I need to finish commissions wherever I happen to find myself but also because I was attracted to the idea that I was carrying something from the Mediterranean to north-east Iceland. I mended the cape slowly, tacking the silk to a cotton layer, securing flyaway fragments of silk and lining up the sequins into roughly straight lines.

During this mending time, I became curious about what the gold cape might actually look like when worn on the body. How would it sit and move, how would the handles work and what would it feel like to wear? I met the local high-school vice-principal and asked if she thought her students might like to try on the cape, examine the repair and learn about its beginnings at the Monte Carlo Opera House. She was enthusiastic and a group of children

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gathered at the nearby community hall, danced about in the gold cape and struck poses on the stage against a blue-and-gold star-studded backdrop. Then, after the children left, some adults who had gathered to watch the children took their turn to wear the cape on stage and outside in the parking lot, dancing to music from an upstairs room. That afternoon was a lot of fun.

When I returned home to England I thought a lot about the experience of actually wearing the cape: how easy it was for the children to wear. The cape slipped on quite naturally over their clothes. I also recalled how readily they transformed themselves into characters when they wore it. How, above all, the afternoon was simple – I hadn't needed to explain a great deal about the cape itself.

So I wrote to the museum in Monaco: 'The cape, now mended, is ready to go on the road. I propose The Flying Gold Cape Project. This will be a series of cape-wearing sessions with different people at different locations across three countries. The sessions will aim to give people the opportunity to try on the cape and experience a feeling of dressing-up and transformation, and to see the repair; to enjoy the cape and have fun wearing and handling an old garment without fear of damaging it – it can after all, always be mended again.'

The museum agreed to this idea and in spring 2018, together with the photographer Michele Panzeri, I set off on tour with the gold cape. At each stop the cape worked differently. In Blönduós in Iceland school students paraded through town looking for natural beauty and dramatic landscapes to set the scene; the cape was worn by the members of a local craft club; a farmer posed with it, her farm as the background; and a weaver wore it on the deck of her studio. At Cap Fleuri, Monaco's retirement home, music played and people wore the gold cape and sang, performing for each other, with those observing occasionally joining in and singing too; care assistants wore it in the garden; museum staff wore it at work; at the Opéra Garnier, its original home, caped figures stood on the stage and in the auditorium for their moment in the limelight.

And in London, primary-school children drew imaginary capes and then dressed up in the gold cape itself and paraded with serious faces in the school, photographing each other, and in the playground running with it, so that the cape flew out behind them.

Sixty-three people from Blönduós, Monaco and London wore the cape. It became more damaged, with fragments of silk flying away at each stop. It is thinner now and more well-worn. It has had to be re-repaired. The gold cape has had a second, wholly unexpected life just as varied and extraordinary as its first, echoes of which can now be heard. ©

Celia Pym

The mended gold cape is held in the permanent collection of the Nouveau Musée National de Monaco and exhibited at Villa Paloma, La Table des Matières, along with portraits of each participant taken in 2018.

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